

# Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*: An All-Inclusive Study

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**Abstract** – *The present paper will attempt to study the Play A Raisin in the Sun, by Lorraine Hansberry in a holistic manner. The play deals with the lives of the five members of an African American family living in the south side of Chicago in the 1960s. Briefly introducing the playwright, dreams and aspirations of the family have been discussed in detail. The matriarch of the family, Lena Younger, has a dream to buy a house. Benethea, who earlier wanted to become a doctor, now wants to learn guitar to express her feelings. Walter harbours a dream to open a liquor store and make large sums of money. Ruth also wants to buy a house and wishes to see her family in a better light. All the African American people living in the new American society suffers from “double consciousness” and this family is no exception. This concept has been elaborated with special reference to the life of Benethea Younger.*

**Key Words:** Matriarch, House, African-American, Consciousness.

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## INTRODUCTION

An African-American playwright, Lorraine Hansberry was the first female playwright whose play was produced on Broadway. She died at a young age of thirty four, yet she holds a prominent place in the Afro-American literature. She wrote extensively about the fate of African people living in the American societies in the Post World war II era.

The African-American literature is a body of work written by writers of African heritage while living in the American society. It mainly deals with the affairs of the poor black people. Lorraine Hansberry is no exception in this case. A domestic tragedy of an African-American family living in the south side of Chicago in 1956, *A Raisin in the Sun* is the most famous play of Lorraine Hansberry. The inspiration for the play has been drawn by the playwright from a poem by Langston Hughes which is titled “Harlem”. The poem quotes:

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up

like a raisin in the sun?

Or fester like a sore—

And then run? (*poetryfoundation.org*)

The title of the play has been taken from these lines. The play depicts the lives of the five members of the

Younger family who are living in a cramped accommodation. The attempts to adjust in a two bedroom house symbolically represent the attempts of the family to adjust in a society which has a strong antipathy for the African people. While talking about the domestic matters, the author has tried to bring to the fore the universal themes lying beneath the outer surface of the play. Racial segregation, assimilation and anti-assimilation, and abolition of slavery are some of the issues of universal significance that have been dealt with by the author in this play.

Almost every character of the play harbours a dream in his/her heart. The matriarch of the family, Lena Younger, or Mama, has a dream to buy a new house for her family and have a big garden of her own. Her husband was a hardworking man who had a dream to liberate his family from the oppression of the white people. He died without realising his dream. When the play opens, the members of the family are eagerly waiting for a cheque to arrive. Lena is also waiting for this cheque as the money that the cheque will procure belongs to the insurance of her husband. She wants to use this money for her dream of buying a new house. When the cheque arrives, she gives one third of the total amount for the payment of the new house which lies in a “white” colony (emphasis added). She is repeatedly discouraged by the members of the society not to buy a house in the locality which is dominated by white members. But

at last her time and again deferred dream do come true.

Mama's daughter Benethea seems to be an ambitious girl and she wants to become a doctor. She is extremely good at her studies and Mama wants to reserve a share of the money for her education. But Benethea keeps on changing her dream and she decides to learn to play guitar to express herself. She seems to be romantically engaged with two guys George Murchison and Joseph Asagai. The former is a rich white guy and the latter is a Nigerian guy who, currently suffering rootlessness, wishes to return to his country to reaffirm his identity. Benethea is given traditional Nigerian dresses as gift by Asagai. She wears them and engages her drunken brother Walter in a traditional folk dance. This dance reminds us that somewhere in their subconscious mind they belong to Africa, not America. In the process of making themselves modern, they have left their roots behind and trying to advance in the American society. Marshall Berman gives a beautiful definition of Modernity in his article "All that is Solid, Melts into Air". He says: "To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world and at the same time that threatens to destroy everything we have" (Introduction 15)

Walter, Mama's son, has a dream to open a liquor store to earn large sums of money. He, at one stage in the play, says that money nowadays has become the measuring tape for success. Mama and Walter talks about money:

MAMA: Oh- So now it's life. Money is life. Once upon a time freedom used to be life -now it is money. I guess the world really do change....

WALTER: No- it was always money, Mama. We just didn't know about it. (khdzamlit.weebly.com)

For this purpose, he wants a share in the insurance money. He wants to assert his masculinity by ways of earning money. He invests money in a liquor store, but his friend absconds with the money and Walter is left devastated. It seemed, at first, he may not be able to realise his dream. But, at last, somehow he manages to assert his masculinity and rejects the offer of taking back the down payment of the house. While drunk, he dances with Benethea, and makes fun of the traditional practices of their African past. This practice of Walter makes it clear how alienated they have become from their native culture. Though Walter drinks occasionally, after buying a new house he has hopes that he would live with his neighbours peacefully. He says that "[He] has decided to move into our new house because my father – my father- he earned it for us brick by brick. We don't want to make no trouble for nobody or fight no causes, and we will try to be good neighbours" (khdzamlit.weebly.com).

Ruth, Walter's wife, also has the same dream to liberate her family from the racial tyrannies and see them in a better condition. She is a wise woman and thinks about aborting her forthcoming child so that it doesn't become an extra burden on the family which is already facing financial strain.

There are a number of symbols that have been employed by the playwright. The first and foremost symbol is the 'raisin' of the title. It has been used by the author to symbolize the transformation that a person working hard under the heat of the sun would undergo like a grape turning into raisin. Another symbol is the flower pot that Mama keeps near the kitchen. It is a symbol of her dream and she waters it every day as if she is watering her dream. From this small flower pot she wants to move on and have a garden of her own, so that her grandson could play in it and she could work in it.

Benethea's straightening of her hair symbolically represents the rejection of her African past. Her friend Joseph Asagai repeatedly reminds her that she should not reject her ancestry. At last, she cuts her hair and keeps only curly "African" hair (emphasis added). Her hair is a symbol of her pride and her friend makes her realize her that she should not keep her pride under the cover of Americanism. This incident, dealing with the hair, reminds the tragic of story of Samson, in the drama *Samson Agonistes* by John Milton. Samson also had his strength in his hair. Phillistines rid him of his power by cutting off his hair and in the same way Benethea cuts off her hair in order to rid herself of the false American identity that she has assumed. She can hope her "strength again to grow up with... [her] hair".

Ruth's, Walter's wife, pregnancy can be interpreted in two ways: one as a symbol of upcoming hope and the other as a symbol of approaching troubles. It can serve as a ray of hope for the family. It may represent the seed of the dream that has been "planted with a great need" (Hughes, Democracy, Poemhunter.com). The nature would take its course and this child will come into the world. In the same way, nature would take its course and justice will be done to the aspirations of the family. This child can also be interpreted as the symbol of approaching trouble. The five member family is already living in a two bedroom house and the arrival of another member in the family could make the situation worse off.

All the members of the play are living in the American society with an African consciousness. They have, to quote W E B du Bois, developed a "double consciousness" of being African as well as American (*Gutenberg.org*). They could have migrated from Africa hundreds of years back, yet they are not able to shed the identity which their home land has bestowed on them. They have been continuously struggling to assimilate in the

American society as Americanised Africans. They are completely comfortable neither in their new American society nor in their identity of being of African descent.

## CONCLUSION

Thus, in concluding words, it can be said that the play *A Raisin in the Sun* covers all the major issues that an African American family could have faced in the 1960s in a society dominated by White people. Nobody could have thought at the time when this play was written that this family drama would make such an everlasting impact. This tragedy with a somewhat happy ending makes the reader aware how far African people suffered in the times of the dominance of white people.

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